

CHARLIE HEBDO'S CARICATURES OF PROPHET MUHAMMAD; DO MUSLIMS DEVALUE FREEDOM OF SPEECH

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French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* republished caricatures of Prophet Muhammad wearing a bomb-shaped turban with a lit fuse protruding, to mark the start of a criminal trial into the deadly attack on its office not long after it published the first caricatures of the prophet.

On January 7, 2015, armed assailants raided *Charlie Hebdo's* Paris office and killed 12 people including some of the magazine's cartoonists. They announced that the magazine's publication of caricatures mocking the prophet had been "revenged" adding that the magazine had deliberately used blasphemy to stir up hatred against Muslims around the world by publishing the satirical caricatures.

The incendiary caricatures were first published in the Danish daily *Jyllands-Posten* on September 30, 2005; *Charlie Hebdo* then published them in

full in 2006, leading its writers and cartoonists to receive regular death threats, which ended with the attack. The trial was scheduled to begin in April but was postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is expected to last until November 10.

Republishing of the caricatures has enraged Muslims around the world and renewed provocative reactions for insulting the prophet. Meanwhile, proponents argued that Muslims are simply intolerant and devalue freedom of speech.

In 2005, Copenhagen became the center of an international controversy after *Jyllands-Posten* Newspaper published cartoons depicting Prophet Muhammad with a bomb in his turban. This led to an outbreak of verbal and physical abuse against individuals, arson, and bomb attacks on



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religious centers and commercial properties in Denmark. The Danish Muslims were required to affirm that the Danish constitution was above the Qur'an.

In 2006, *Charlie Hebdo* reprinted the drawings ridiculing sensitivity around Prophet Muhammad in the name of media freedom; many copies were sold. The cartoonists chose to satirize a venerated prophet, whom more than a billion Muslims regard as the ideal model of their life and values. This was seen as a direct attack on Islam and the denigration of the faith.

Protests erupted in an arc, stretching from Europe through Africa, to East Asia. European countries evacuated staffs of embassies and non-governmental organizations and Muslim countries withdrew their ambassadors.

Freedom of expression is the “right to express one’s ideas and opinions freely...without deliberately causing harm to others’ character and/or reputation by false or misleading statements.” Freedom of expression is not a right without limits. While there is no justification for the attack that took place in 2015, it should be noted that caricatures as part of freedom of expression cannot be enjoyed in a way that belittles the rights and dignity of others. Legal guarantees that prevent people from infringing on the rights and freedom of others, while exercising their rights to freedom of expression, need to be clearly defined.

Gallup poll data from Britain and France affirmed so. 57% of Britons and 45% of French said that a newspaper printing a picture of Prophet Muhammad should not be allowed under the protection of free speech, while 35% and 40% respectively said that it should be allowed. More than 75% of both populations say that a cartoon making light of the Holocaust should not be allowed under the protection of free speech, and roughly 86% of the British and French publicly say the same about printing racial slurs. Hence it can be seen that for many European citizens, free speech is nuanced and contextual, not a black and white absolute.

When asked about the caricatures, French President Emmanuel Macron said that “It’s never the place of a president of the Republic to pass judgment on the editorial choice of a journalist or newsroom, never. Because we have freedom of the press.” While everyone appreciates the fact that a government cannot put curbs on the enjoyment of constitutionally guaranteed freedom of expression, it is important to remember that no human freedom can be absolute, and indeed none is absolute.

The sort of legal guarantees put in place to limit the freedom of expression of people who deny the Holocaust or write negative things about the Holocaust is perfect precedence. Why would it be illegal to deny or write negatively about the Holocaust, but it is legal to offend Muslims? Discrimination and prejudice against the about 14 million Jews, named with the powerful term anti-semitism are punished with dire consequences for those who promote it. But the same prejudice toward the almost 2 billion Muslims in the world is given a red carpet.

Prophet Muhammad was born in the year 570 AD; today more than 1400 years after his death, his influence is still powerful, and about 2 billion people of all backgrounds around the world have believed in his integrity, character, evidence, legacy, and embraced Islam. Misconceptions about Islam creep in because people learn about faith from the news rather than from the Quran and the prophet. Once the religion is studied from the correct sources, it would be clear that such mockery of the religion and prophet is far from the truth.

A UN Development Program (UNDP) study entitled *Journey to Extremism in Africa*, published on September 7 found that 57% of respondents who had voluntarily joined an extremist group were either because they failed to read Islamic texts, or failed to understand what they had read. This shows that dogma and indoctrination, rather than deep religious education, is the cause of the recruitment for violent extremism. The deeper a person is

able to read and understand the Quran and its interpretation, the more immune that person is, to such recruitment.

Karen Armstrong in her book *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet* writes, “far from being the father of jihad, Muhammad was a peacemaker, who risked his life and nearly lost the loyalty of his closest companions because he was determined to effect a reconciliation with Mecca.” Diwan Chand Sharma once wrote in his book *The Prophets of the East* that, “Muhammad was the soul of kindness and his influence was felt and never forgotten by those around him.” France’s Grand Rabi Joseph Sitruk observed in the Associated Press in the

midst of the cartoons controversy that, “we gain nothing by lowering religions, humiliating them and making caricatures of them. It’s a lack of honesty and respect”.

To sum it up, the lowering, humiliation, and disrespect towards Islam and its followers in its relation to freedom of press will require a change in two major areas; cultural sensitivity and the setting of a single standard about freedom of expression. Understanding Muslim public opinion can be key to pre-empting and preventing unnecessary conflicts. Muslim reactions are predictable and the conflicts avoidable.

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